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Pearce, N. (2005) *Collecting, connoisseurship and commerce: an examination of the life and career of Stephen Wootton Bushell (1844-1908)*. Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society, 70 . pp. 17-25. ISSN 0306-0926

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/25438/>

Deposited on: 06 April 2010

COLLECTING, CONNOISSEURSHIP AND COMMERCE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE LIFE AND CAREER OF STEPHEN WOOTTON BUSHELL (1844–1908)

Lecture given by Nick Pearce on Tuesday 29 November 2005

The name of Stephen Bushell will be more than familiar to members of this Society. Although dead for nearly a century, his contribution to British scholarship in the area of Chinese ceramics in particular is still recognised and his major works on the subject, such as *Oriental Ceramic Art* and *Description of Chinese Pottery and Porcelain*, are still quoted.¹ In the broader context there is his two-volume *Chinese Art*, first published in 1904 and 1906 respectively by the Victoria & Albert Museum, as a 'Handbook' to its collections and which was reprinted in 1907, revised and republished in 1909 and reprinted again in the decades following. In fact, as Craig Clunas has pointed out, the Handbook was still in print some ninety years after it first appeared.² Even a French edition was prepared: *L'Art Chinois*, translated by H. d'Ardenne de Tizac and published in Paris in 1910.

Although much has been written about aspects of Stephen Bushell's published work and of his association with the Victoria & Albert Museum both as agent and as author, little has been written about his life or, indeed, his other activities. I have already sketched some aspects of his life and work in a recent book that deals with a collection of photographs of Beijing once owned by Bushell and I have drawn upon this research when discussing his art collecting for institutions, private individuals and on his own account.³ However, this article details more of Bushell's origins and personal circumstances with the aim of giving a rounder picture of his extraordinary life.

Stephen Wootton Bushell was born at the Moat in Ash-next-Sandwich in Kent on 28 July 1844, to William Bushell and Sarah Frances Bushell (née Wootton). His father, William Bushell was a farmer of some means. According to the 1861 Census, the farm, which was situated at Poulton near Woodnesborough, was three-hundred-and-ninety acres and employed seventeen men and twelve boys.⁴ By 1881, the farm had increased to five-hundred acres and employed twenty-four men.⁵ Stephen had an elder brother, John Thornline Bushell, and a younger brother (James) and sister (Catherine). Stephen's mother died in 1850 when he was only six-years old and he was subsequently brought up by his stepmother, Fanny Matilda who was fourteen years younger than her husband and who bore him another daughter (Fanny), in 1862.⁶

¹ Bushell (1896) and Bushell 1910.

² See Clunas (1997), p. 399, footnote 9.

³ Pearce (2005), pp 43–62. Bushell's shaping of English-language scholarship on Chinese art is comprehensively examined in Green (2002), Chapter 4. Bushell's collecting for the V&A is also discussed in Kerr (1986), Kerr (1990) and Kerr (2004). See also Clunas (1994), pp 334–335 and note 45.

⁴ 1861 Census for the District of Eastry in the Borough of Woodnesborough, Sandwich, Kent, National Archives: RG09, folio 114, p. 7.

⁵ 1881 Census for the District of Eastry in the Borough of Woodnesborough, Sandwich, Kent, National Archives: RG11, folio 86, p. 7.

⁶ 1881 Census for the District of Eastry in the Borough of Woodnesborough, Sandwich, Kent, National Archives: RG11, folio 86, p. 7.

Stephen was educated at Tunbridge Wells School and Grange Court, Chigwell.⁷ Being a younger son, it was necessary for him to find an alternative occupation to that of farming. He chose a solid middle-class profession and went on to study medicine at Guy's Hospital, part of London University, where he excelled. He was an exhibitioner and gold medallist and as one obituary recalled: 'As a student at Guy's in the Sixties, he quickly established a reputation for rapidity of reading and had the happy faculty of being able to remember accurately what he read...Moreover, he was not only a good reader, but an excellent observer.'⁸ While these were ideal attributes for a doctor, they were distinctly advantageous for someone who would go on to become fluent in Chinese. After graduating in 1866, he became a House Surgeon at Guy's and, in 1867, resident medical officer at Bethlehem Royal Hospital.

It is not known whether Bushell actively sought a medical posting abroad, but in January 1868, he was recommended for the post of Medical Attendant to the British Legation in Beijing by Dr William Lockhart (1811–96), founder of the London Missionary Society's Hospital at Beijing.⁹ Bushell was offered the position by Lord Stanley in a letter of 20 January 1868 and accepted in a reply dated 24 January.¹⁰ His formal letter of appointment followed on 6 February. Bushell was offered an annual salary of £600 per annum and was '...expected to give medical assistance and attendance to all persons employed at Peking and its immediate neighbourhood and in the public service of the Department.'¹¹ Lord Stanley also allowed him, subject of official approval, '...to engage in private practice at Peking', although it was pointed out rather gloomily that Sir Rutherford Alcock, the then Minister to Beijing, 'does not speak very encouragingly of the prospects of a medical man in that respect.'¹² Bushell sailed from Southampton for Shanghai en route for Beijing on 29 February 1868.

It is likely that Bushell was already acquainted with his future wife Florence Jane Mathews before he left for China. She was the daughter of Robert Newman Barnes Mathews, a doctor from Bickley, in Bushell's home county of Kent, and they were married in December 1874, when Bushell was home on leave.¹³ The couple returned to China the following year and there they remained (excepting periods of leave), until his retirement in 1899. Although Bushell was obviously highly active during his thirty-one years residency, not least as a connoisseur and collector of Chinese art, little of his personality and indeed his activities were recorded by his contemporaries. Sir Robert Hart (1835–1911), Inspector-General of the Chinese Maritime Customs, makes only passing reference to Bushell and his wife in his extensive correspondence and the published accounts of other residents and visitors make scant if any reference to him. The most personal account is given by the writer and wife of Hugh Fraser, Secretary of the British Legation between 1874 and 1879, Mary Crawford Fraser, who knew the young Stephen Bushell well. Writing of the summer months when the Legation staff repaired to temple accommodation in the Western Hills, she said: 'One of the really pleasant sides of life in the hills was the friendliness of the country people around us. We were detested in the city and never passed outside the Compound without being made to feel it, but in the hills we were regarded as benefactors, spending the only money ever seen there and, crowning qualification, having with

⁷ The following details of Bushell's early career are drawn from: Henri Cordier, 'Nécrologie: S.W. Bushell' in T'oung pao, series 2, vol. 9, 1908, p. 596–97; 'Obituary', *British Medical Journal*, 2, July–December, 1908, p. 954; 'Obituary', *The Times*, Monday 21 September, 1908, p. 11; *Dictionary of National Biography, Second Supplement*, London, 1912, vol. 1, pp 275–76; Samuel Couling, *The Encyclopaedia Sinica*, Shanghai, 1917, p. 77.

⁸ 'Obituary', *British Medical Journal*, p. 954.

⁹ National Archives, FO.17/508, 1868.

¹⁰ National Archives, FO.17/508, 1868.

¹¹ National Archives, FO.17/508, 1868.

¹² Letter of 20th January 1868, National Archives, FO.17/508, 1868.

¹³ Civil Registration Index for England and Wales, 1837–1983, District of Bromley, County of Kent, volume 2a, p. 516.



Fig. 1. Dr Stephen Bushell, c.1870, carte-de-visite. Photograph Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.



Fig. 2. Stephen W. Bushell, C.M.G., B.Sc., M.D., as reproduced in the Frontispiece of the *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, Vol. 29, 1954–55.

us, much of the time, our good Doctor Bushell who could talk to the people of their ailments in excellent vernacular and gave them medicines free of charge. This fact alone set him quite apart from other human beings in their estimation, such divine folly as giving something for nothing not entering into Chinese methods'.¹⁴

Something of Bushell's character can perhaps be judged from two surviving photographs showing him as a young man just arrived in China (fig. 1) and in middle age, looking somewhat earnest, yet bright eyed and alert (fig. 2). In his various publications he was always modest and ever keen to 'disclaim any pretension to authority'.¹⁵ Official recognition came in 1897 with the award of the C.M.G. and from the point of view of his rivals and potential critics he was a respected figure. Writing in 1901 Edward Parker (1849–1926), Professor of Chinese at Manchester University, wrote that although Bushell was no 'professed sinologue', he had '...contributed more to accurate sinology than some others who profess too much'.¹⁶ Even Edouard Chavannes (1865–1918), who questioned Bushell's judgement on at least one occasion, delivered a flattering homage to him in the French Academy in 1906.¹⁷

The Beijing that Bushell would have known was considered by most foreigners to be something of a backwater. Unlike Shanghai, it was not a commercial centre. Its importance lay

¹⁴ Crawford Fraser (1910), vol. 2, p. 167.

¹⁵ Bushell (1904), Vol. 1, Preface.

¹⁶ E.H. Parker, *China*, London, 1901, Preface.

¹⁷ Edouard Chavannes, 'Academie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres', *Comptes-rendus des séances de l'année*, September, 1906, p. 485. Chavannes was critical of Bushell's judgement over the 'Bushell Bowl' (see note 27 below) and questioned the authenticity of the bronze in *T'oung pao*, March, 1905, p. 120.

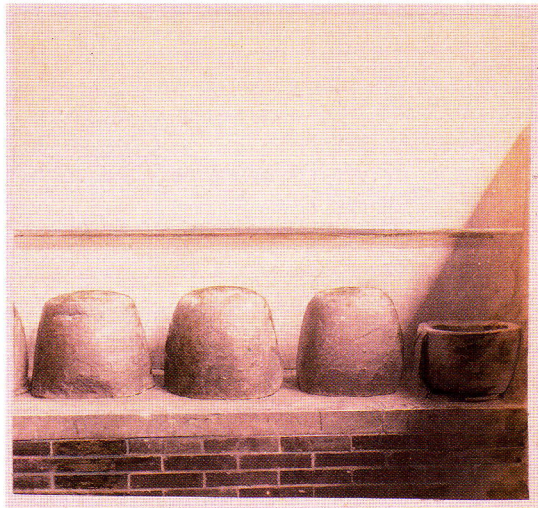


Fig. 3. Stone Drums (*shigu*), formerly in the Temple of Confucius. Photograph by John Thomson, 1871.

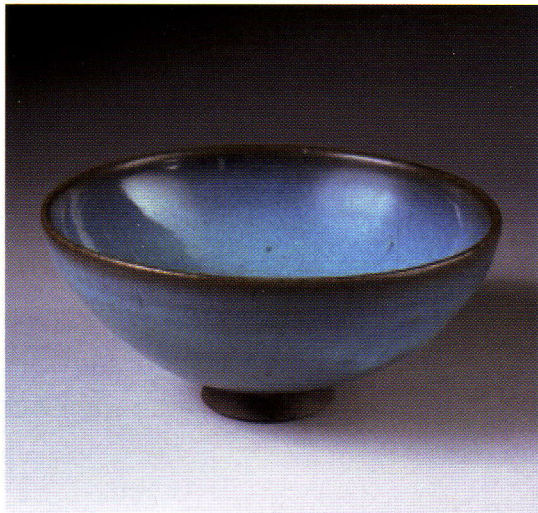


Fig. 4. Jun ware bowl, Jin-Yuan dynasty, 13th century, collected by Bushell in 1882 (46–1883). Reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria & Albert Museum.

strictly in the political sphere. The foreign contingent was also small, numbering between about fifty in 1874 to around two-hundred by 1889. The social round would have been largely uneventful, providing the ideal opportunity for the more inquisitive and industrious, such as Bushell, to engage in extra-curricular activities. He filled his time with the study of Chinese and Chinese art. His position as Legation doctor was a distinct advantage in progressing his interests as he explains in the Introduction to *Oriental Ceramic Art*: ‘I have obtained access, in the exercise of the duties of my profession, to several palaces and private houses, and have in this way had many opportunities of seeing the treasures of native collectors, which usually are so rigidly closed to foreigners’.¹⁸

In all likelihood he became familiar with the art that surrounded him through a variety of sources: his Chinese patients and antique dealer shops and market stalls located mainly in the Outer or Chinese City clustered around Liulichang, an area to the west of the central gate of Qianmen and named after an old tile-making workshop once situated there. Temples in the area also hosted New Year and monthly markets in their courtyards, which spilled out into the lanes immediately surrounding Qianmen, known as Dashalar.¹⁹ Small-time dealers in curios, furs and embroideries would also make daily visits to the Legations and presumably to other western residents.²⁰

Just five years after his arrival in Beijing, he published his first article: a study of the so-called Zhou Dynasty Stone Drums housed in the Temple of Confucius (fig. 3), which appeared in the *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, in 1873.²¹ It was also around this time that he started to correspond with Augustus Wollaston Franks (1826–97), Keeper of the newly created Department of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum and to buy objects for Franks on a personal basis.²² Bushell had been collecting for himself since 1869, so

¹⁸ Bushell (1896), text edition 1899, Introduction p. 1.

¹⁹ For details of markets and shops in Beijing, see Naquin (2000), pp 623–32.

²⁰ Visits by antique dealers are described by a number of visitors to Beijing in the late-nineteenth century. See for example: William Henry Seward, ed. Olive Risley Seward, *William H. Seward's Travels Around the World*, New York, 1873, p. 135 and Fraser (1910), p. 111.

²¹ Bushell (1873), pp 133–81.

²² Letter of 22 February 1882, from A. W. Franks to Philip Cunliffe Owen in the Nominal File relating to Dr & Mrs S. W. Bushell, V&A Archives, London (MA/1/B3676). See also Harrison-Hall (1997), p. 221 and Wilson (1984), p. 38.

that by 1874, he had a sizeable collection of bronzes which he offered to loan to the then South Kensington Museum.²³

It was Franks who recommended Bushell to the South Kensington Museum to act as an agent for them in China. It seems that Bushell offered his services to the then Director, Sir Philip Cunliffe Owen with Franks being his referee. In support of Bushell, Franks wrote to Cunliffe Owen: 'In answer, I can only say that I know that he is intimately acquainted with most forms of Chinese art and I should think you very fortunate if you can receive his co-operation in the matter'.²⁴ Bushell went on to make two-hundred-and-thirty-three purchases for the Museum in 1882 and 1883, at a modest sum of £500.²⁵ They were mostly Ming and Qing period ceramics, but included examples each of Jun, Guan and white Huozhou wares of the Jin-Yuan period, the first purchases of these types by the Museum (fig. 4). W.B. Honey was later to claim that Bushell's purchases initiated the Museum's first 'considered plan' of acquisition in the area of Chinese art.²⁶ In 1898, his bronze collection was purchased by the Museum for £400 and around this time, he received the commission from the Board of Education, to write the Handbook *Chinese Art*, for the newly renamed Victoria & Albert Museum.²⁷

In the intervening years, Bushell was involved heavily with two major American collectors. The first of these was William Thompson Walters (1819–94), of Baltimore who was introduced to Bushell by Franks in the late 1880s. Walters was interested in Bushell's translation of the *Tao shuo* (Description of Pottery), written by Zhu Yan in 1774, which became part of the catalogue of the Walters Collection, *Oriental Ceramic Art*, published in 1896. The Walters collection was, at the time, considered to be one of the finest and most comprehensive in Europe or America, illustrative of the fact that knowledge of Chinese art in the West at the end of the nineteenth century and the content of collections were hardly more developed than they had been during the previous century.

The Catalogue was the first major study of Chinese, Japanese and Korean ceramics in English and consisted of ten large volumes, with over four-hundred black and white halftone illustrations and one-hundred-and-sixteen full-colour lithographs produced by Louis Prang of Boston from original watercolours painted by Worcester porcelain decorators James Callowhill & Sons. The precision of the watercolours capture the decoration and quality of the glazes and the reflection of the buildings across from Walters' house, from where the artists' worked (fig. 5).²⁸ Each volume was published at intervals of about sixty days, with the completed work, in a limited edition of five-hundred, costing each subscriber US\$500. In addition, subscribers were offered the opportunity to personalize their copies by having their name printed on the title page.

The second American collector with whom Bushell was heavily involved was Heber Reginald Bishop (1840–1902), a New York businessman who made his fortune from Cuban sugar exports, railway and iron and steel investments (fig. 6). Bishop's main interest was jade and hardstones, forming a collection of nearly one-thousand pieces which he donated to the Metropolitan Museum in 1902. Through the recommendation of William Laffan, one of William Walters' close advisors on art, Bishop contacted Bushell in January 1889 asking him to collaborate on a major publication on jade.²⁹ Bishop's aim was to produce both a catalogue of

²³ Dr & Mrs S.W. Bushell Nominal File, V&A Archives, London (MA/1/B3676).

²⁴ Franks to Cunliffe Owen, Bushell Nominal File, V&A Archives, London (MA/1/B3676). Franks to Cunliffe Owen, Bushell Nominal File, V&A Archives, London (MA/1/B3676).

²⁵ Dr & Mrs S.W. Bushell Nominal File, V&A Archives, London (MA/1/B3676).

²⁶ Honey (1927), p. ix.

²⁷ Honey (1927), p. ix. The bronzes were registered as M.174–206–1899 and included the fake *pan*, known as the 'Bushell Bowl', and which is discussed in Kerr (1990), pp 71–4. No documentation survives in the V&A Archives relating to Bushell's commission to write *Chinese Art*.

²⁸ For further details see William R. Johnston, *William and Henry Walters, The Reticent Collectors*, Baltimore, 1999.

²⁹ Heber R. Bishop, et al, *The Bishop Collection: Investigations and Studies in Jade*, 2 vols, New York, 1906.

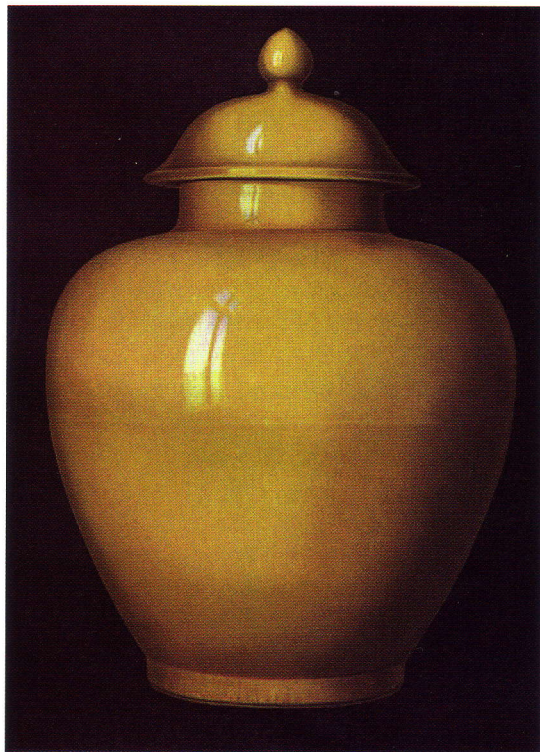


Fig. 5. Jar, porcelain with yellow monochrome glaze, Kangxi period (1662–1722). Lithograph from an original watercolour as reproduced in *Oriental Ceramic Art*, colour plate V.

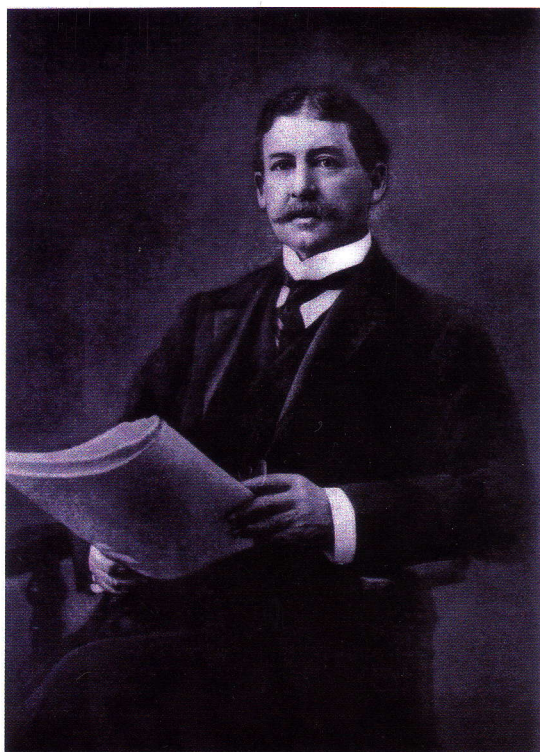


Fig. 6. Portrait of Heber R. Bishop as reproduced in the *American Anthropologist*, Jan-March, 1903 plate XIV.

his collection and a major work that tapped the latest mineralogical and art historical knowledge. Information on Bushell's involvement with and collecting for Bishop survives in correspondence held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, in which a vivid picture emerges of Bushell's involvement in both the planning and execution of the Catalogue and in collecting further pieces in Beijing to augment the collection.³⁰ Bushell worked for Bishop between January 1889, when he was first recruited and 1902 when, in retirement, he was finalizing details of the Catalogue's publication. He even assisted Bishop to collect further pieces when the latter visited Beijing for three weeks in the spring of 1892.³¹ Over the years Bushell commissioned an article on jade (*yu shou*), from Tang Rongzuo (described by Bushell as a friend and scholar), had it rendered in woodblock and also made a translation; commissioned an artist, Li Shichuan, to paint a series of watercolours illustrating the processes of jade manufacture; completed the descriptive catalogue and an extensive bibliography of Chinese and Western language works on jade, and he collected for Bishop on a regular basis. For this work he was well rewarded, receiving not only regular sums for purchases, but also £300 for his catalogue entries.³² He also spent two months during the winter of 1893-4 completing the catalogue in the library of Bishop's palatial brownstone mansion at 881 Fifth Avenue. Bishop's publication was ambitious and lavish

³⁰ The correspondence (mostly from Bushell to Bishop), is contained in the Heber Bishop Jade Collection Files Nos.1–3, File 2: *Jade Correspondence* Bk II, held by the Department of Asian Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. A comprehensive analysis of the Correspondence can be found in Pearce (2005), pp 52–7.

³¹ *Jade Correspondence*, Stephen Bushell to Heber Bishop, 24 May, 1892. *Jade Correspondence*, Stephen Bushell to Heber Bishop, 24 May, 1892.

³² The *Jade Correspondence* documents Bishop's payments to Bushell over the years. Bushell's payment of £300 for his catalogue entries is included in a letter from Bushell to Bishop of 22 Dec 1892.

and followed the standard set by Walters' *Oriental Ceramic Art*. Following Walters' example it was privately printed in a limited edition and made use of hand-painted illustrations translated into colour lithography by Prang and Forbes of Boston.

On 17 November, 1899, Bushell retired from medical service on the grounds of ill-health. This may have been the diagnosis of a weak heart, which would contribute to his death eight years later. On return to England, the Bushell's first took a house in the leafy middle-class suburb of Upper Norwood in South London before moving to a large recently built detached house named 'Ravensholt', in Mount Park Road, Harrow-on-the Hill. This comfortable home, grander than any of his previous houses, was made possible, not on the pay of a retired civil servant, but as a result of his other more lucrative activities. Retirement allowed him to embark upon still further large projects: the two-volume *Chinese Art* for South Kensington (1904 and 1906) and a revised edition of the *Catalogue of The Morgan Collection of Chinese Porcelains*, published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 1907. He was working on his *Description of Chinese Pottery and Porcelain*, when he died at home on 19 September, 1908, from a six-month bout of colitis compounded by a weak heart.³³

Much of what I have been discussing has focused upon Bushell as scholar, as collector or as agent for major collectors. The Bushell-Bishop correspondence confirms that Bushell was more active a collector than perhaps has been generally recognized before and a major influence on the formation and interpretation of a number of collections on both sides of the Atlantic. There is also strong evidence that Bushell advised and bought for lesser collectors while he was in Peking: Edward Parker and James Stuart Lockhart (1858–1936) are two for whom he is known to have bought items. His wider interests also saw him collecting plant specimens and seeds on behalf of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew between 1876 and 1888 and, as a corresponding member of the Zoological Society, a pair of young specimens of the rare *Macacus tschiliensis* monkey, obtained by Bushell near the Qing Tombs in 1886.³⁴

Bushell also bought to sell. Between 1880 and 1890, he sold anonymously under various pseudonyms, usually a variant on: 'Oriental Porcelain Collected by a Gentleman in China', at a series of auction sales of mixed items mounted by Christie, Manson and Wood in 1880, 1886, 1888, 1889 and 1890.³⁵ Bushell may have felt that anonymity was politic for a government servant, who was making significant sums from these sales. In the sale of 9 August 1888, for example, ninety-nine lots of porcelain were offered by Bushell, which made a total of £624 15s. 6d, more than his annual salary. All the porcelains sold at Christie's were blue and white, commonly referred to in the catalogues as 'Hawthorn Pattern', or 'Old Nankin Porcelain', indicating a Kangxi period (1662–1722), date, although none were dated in the catalogues and most likely included modern copies.³⁶ It is clear that Bushell was exploiting a fashion in the 1880s for Kangxi-style porcelains, particularly blue and white.

³³ General Register Office, Register of Deaths, District of Uxbridge, Middlesex, entry 22, 21 September, 1908.

³⁴ For details of Bushell's collecting for Kew, see Green (2002), pp 108–9. His collecting for the Zoological Society is reported in *The Times*, 25 June, 1886, p. 4.

³⁵ *Catalogue of Chinese and Japanese Porcelain, Bronzes and Enamels*, Christie, Manson and Wood, King Street, 26th November 1880, lots 55–65; *Catalogue of Chinese Porcelain, Blue and White Hawthorn Jars and Beakers, Turquoise and Crimson Crackle, Chinese Enamels, Carvings in Hardstone and Ivory*, Christie, Manson and Wood, King Street, 9th December 1886, lots 26–95; *A Catalogue of Old Flemish Tapestry, Received from Spain, Musical Instruments, The Property of a Nobleman, Oriental Porcelain Collected by a Gentleman in China*, Christie, Manson and Wood, King Street, 9th August 1888, lots 1–99; *Catalogue of Porcelain, Majolica, Bronzes...And a Small Quantity of Hawthorn Pattern Blue and White Porcelain Received from China*, Christie, Manson and Wood, King Street, 1st February 1889, lots 1–34; *Catalogue of Valuable Chinese Objects of Art Collected by John Darby Gibb Esq...And a Small Consignment of Old Nankin Porcelain*, Christie, Manson and Wood, King Street, 20th February 1890, lots 83–112.

³⁶ See Kerr (1987), pp 169–81.

The complexity of Bushell's life is astonishing: a talented doctor, exceptional linguist, scholar and entrepreneur. He was obviously ambitious and yet at the same time modest and discrete. He seems not to have engaged in the polemics in which others, such as Edouard Chavannes and Paul Pelliot (1878–1945) so delighted. Personally too he seems to have been liked by all. There is no whiff of scandal or impropriety associated with him at any point in his life. Perhaps that is why Stephen Bushell the man has been rather overlooked. Even his obituary in *The Times* was objectively factual.³⁷ What I have attempted to do here is to give some kind of insight into Bushell's many-sided activities and in doing so, I hope, have fleshed out a little more of Bushell the man.

³⁷ *The Times*, 21 September, 1908, p. 11.

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